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HISTORICAL METHOD OF PROFESSOR FREEMAN



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BY

FREDERIC HARRISON

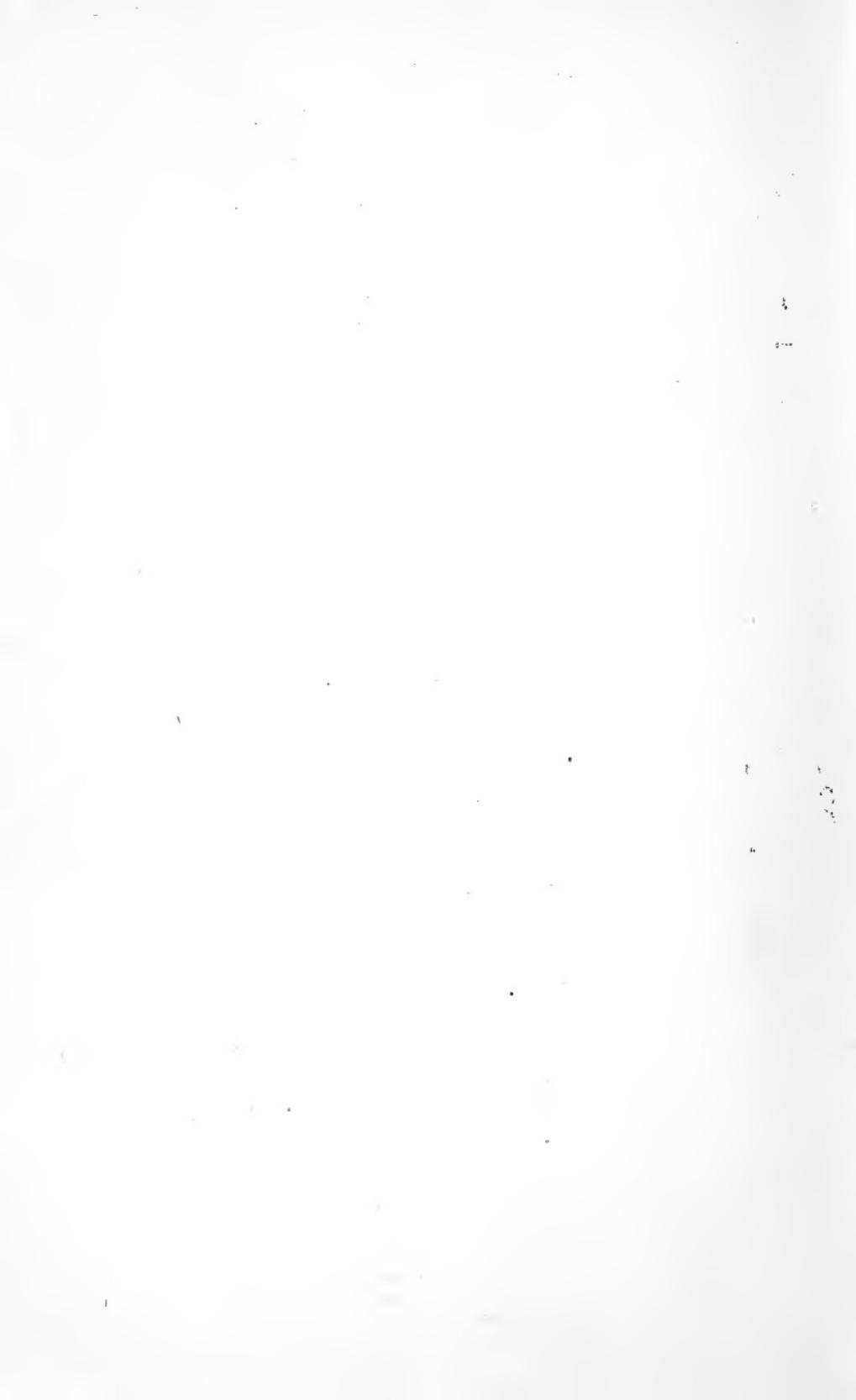
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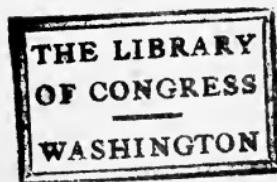




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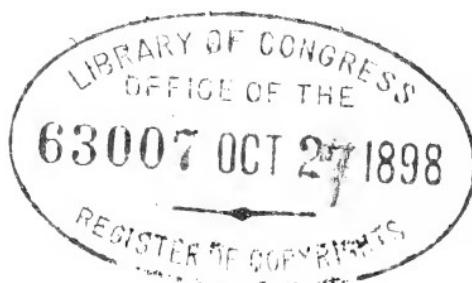
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THE HISTORICAL METHOD OF PROFESSOR FREEMAN¹

IT would be no easy task fully to describe the varied influence of the late Edward A. Freeman on historical learning in England. He effected a revolution in the methods of study, both by precept and example; and he founded a school, the fruits of which have yet to be gathered in. His work in guiding and stimulating the studies of others was, no doubt, far greater than any literary performance of his own, considerable as these were. He will be remembered, if not so much as a great historian, as a leading master in original research.

No doubt he carried his own admirable zeal for truth into a certain exaggeration, which, if it only lessened his popularity with the public for his own case, has led his feebler imitators into a great deal of barren pedantry. The range of his historical studies was really wide, but it recognised very rigid limits of its own. The Professor hardly ever touched any history of the antique world but that of Greece and Rome, and he rarely referred to anything later than the fifteenth century in Europe. The modern State system, the Reformation, the religious and civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the commercial and colonial wars of the eighteenth century, the intellectual, social, and political revolutions of the last 150 years; the entire history of France, Italy, Spain, and Germany later than the feudal ages; the foundation and growth of the British Empire, of the United States;

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the entire history of Africa, Asia, and America, from the age of Menes to our own day,—all this hardly calls out a single allusion in the many works of Freeman.

No one can suppose that he was in any sense ignorant of this enormous mass of history, which he resolutely ignores as part of his system. However much it interested him, he forebore to write about anything which he had not probed to the roots in his own way. His supreme merit as historian is to have insisted in season and out of season on the *Unity of History*. But his own practice did not altogether do justice to his great theory. Those who do not know his occasional essays and voluminous notes and articles might imagine that he confined himself to the grand struggle between English, Danes, and Normans. And it must be admitted that with all his passion for having the whole of history read together as one continuous biography of Man, he speaks at times as if Gauls, the Latin races altogether, and modern men in general, were a poor and degenerate race, whose scuffles and vagaries need not detain ‘a serious historian’ bent on attaining to the higher truth.

This was assuredly not the tone of the famous Rede lecture of 1872. That was in some respects the broadest and most masterly of all Freeman’s essays. We must cast away all distinctions of ‘ancient’ and modern, of ‘dead’ and ‘living,’ and most boldly grapple with the great fact of the unity of history. As man is the same in all ages, the history of man is one in all ages. This and all the reasoning by which the lecturer supported and illustrated his argument, was a powerful corrective of the pedantry which had led the universities to approach history through the avenue of classical literature. ‘European history,’ he declares, ‘from its first glimmerings to our own day, is one unbroken drama, no part of which can be

rightly understood without reference to the other parts which come before and after it.' We must look at the history of man, he adds, *at all events at the history of Aryan man in Europe*, as one unbroken whole, no part of which can be safely looked at without reference to other parts.

Here we have Freeman's philosophy of history in all its strength and also in its weakness. His conception of the unity of history, that 'the history of man is one in all ages,' is truly and strongly grasped. It is the very foundation of a philosophical view of the human record. No English historian, no English philosopher, has ever stated it with such an inner hold on its meaning. Neither Macaulay nor Hallam, neither Grote nor Finlay, neither Milman nor Froude, ever press this idea of the unity of history upon our minds. Mill and Spencer hold the doctrine, but neither of them are in any sense historians, and Spencer finds little at all to interest him in the history of any but uncivilised men. But Freeman, whilst holding the continuity of history as firmly as Mill himself, possessed an intimate knowledge of large parts of the vast human record.

Unfortunately our Professor weakened the force of his own teaching by a fatal qualification. His statement of the unity of man's history wanted nothing in breadth, in fervour, and intensity of grasp, until he limited it to 'the history of the Aryan nations in Europe.' 'European history,' he says, 'is one unbroken drama.' 'The history of Aryan man in Europe is one unbroken whole.' This is a fatal concession to classical pedantry and modern conceit. By placing the history of Greece and of Rome, and then of mediæval North Europe, on a pedestal above all other history, Freeman spoiled the philosophical basis on which he was entrenched. All the new researches into pre-

historic ages, and the early career of African and Asian races, by which history and philosophy have been so greatly inspired, the immense developments of industrial, social, political, and religious life in these recent centuries—all this was almost a closed book to the learned historian of Greeks and Angles. In the result, in spite of the truly ample form in which he announced the conception of the unity of history, in practice he rather reserved his passionate enthusiasm for the three phases of Greek, Roman, and Teutonic civilisation, and the latter only in its mediæval age. In all of these, Freeman is an acute and profound scholar. But, as nine-tenths of human history left him without much living interest, he missed a true philosophy of history.

The vague and halting language which Freeman uses about scientific history in his six lectures on *Comparative Politics*, 1873, sufficiently proves that he had no real grasp on social philosophy at all. In a characteristic note, he tells us it were better the science should 'go nameless than bear the burden of such a name as, for instance, *Sociology*.' When he talks about the supreme discovery of the comparative method in philology, in mythology, in politics, and history, as a memorable stage in the progress of the human mind, he betrays a curious confusion of thought. To put the scientific laws of human evolution on a level with comparative mythology and philology is to take a very low conception of the great achievement of our century. The comparative method is a valuable resource in Sociology, as it is in Biology: but it is only one of many methods, and to erect it into a science by itself is wholly misleading. The study of human fictions, myths, and beliefs (the study of religious evolution, in fact) is an important element in Sociology, and so is the study of the evolution of language. And the study of Comparative Politics is also a part of the

entire science of Social Evolution. But all of these are merely some of the instruments and methods of a comprehensive science of human society. They are as completely subordinate to this larger science, and are as completely its aids and servants, as Embryology is subordinate to Biology, or Barology to Physics. And to sneer at the term *Sociology*, which is accepted by all competent philosophers, and which illustrates in its formation the abiding combination of Greek thought and Roman civilisation, is in these days a droll bit of pedantic ill-humour. The six lectures on *Comparative Politics* contain a mass of valuable learning, and are full of most interesting teaching upon history, but they prove that Professor Freeman, however great as a scholar and a student, had but slight grasp of a sound philosophy of history, and had no very definite philosophy of history of his own.

It is as historian, in the strict sense of the term, not as philosopher, that Freeman's true strength lay. The two offices are distinct. And, though it is a defect in a historian to be without a competent philosophy of his own art, it is not at all decisive of failure. Freeman had a grasp of the past in its living reality far too broad and too tenacious to allow himself to revel in the Biblical mysticism which satisfied Carlyle, Ruskin, and Froude. Freeman distinctly recognized the great truth that the facts of man's career (or rather of Aryan man's career in Europe) might conceivably be stated in terms of some general laws. And this, together with his own marvellous industry, and his passionate thirst for seeing the past as it really was, kept him ever the steadfast historian of truth, and not of mere imagination.

Professor Freeman abundantly expounded and illustrated his own historical method in the nine lectures delivered from his chair in 1884. He there reinforces the doctrine

of the unity of history — ‘the truth which ought to be the centre and life of all our historic studies’ — as formerly stated in the Rede lecture, which he now traces back to Thomas Arnold. Nothing can be better than his protest against dividing up history into ‘ancient’ and ‘modern,’ against allowing classical purism to dictate to the student of history. And his argument would have been both stronger and sounder if he had recognised, not merely continuity and unity in history, but organic evolution and the development of the present from the past. Although there is no arbitrary gulf between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ history, although all history is one continuous narrative of progressive civilisation, although the comparison of institutions and societies in times old and new be most fruitful and instructive, still the ‘new’ world never can reproduce the ‘old’ world, and is a wholly different thing: there are no true ‘cycles’ in human development; history never repeats itself; the Greco-Roman world has only distant analogies with the Feudal-Catholic world, just as this has only distant analogies with the Revolutionary world. The great phases of human civilisation are contrasted rather than compared; they differ as infancy, childhood, manhood, and senility differ in the individual. Sociology deals, not so much with the relations of institutions *inter se*, as with the evolution of society, of thoughts, of manners, of activities, and ideals.

All that the Professor writes on the scope and difficulties of historical study is excellent. And not less so is his memorable protest against the sacrifice of historical truth to literary brilliance of form. He rises into a noble eloquence in the second Oxford lecture of 1884, when he speaks of the temptations that beset the writer and the reader of history, when either are allured by the spell of attractive narration. We all know how this resulted to

Freeman's own successor, of whom perhaps he was thinking when he took up his parable with such prophetic vehemence against 'the evil fortune of mistaking falsehood for truth.'

He speaks wisely and distinctly when he says that, 'in historical writing, narrative and description, though very far from being the whole of the matter, are no small part of it.' It would be difficult to find a better statement of the truth. Freeman's practice in this matter hardly illustrated his theory. Style, form, literary terseness, and brilliancy, never were Freeman's forte. And, unfortunately, it is his longer and more elaborate performances that are most jejune. He could write finely at times, as we see in many parts of his Essays and Addresses. Rome, Byzantium, Athens, stirred him to eloquence. He wrote always correctly and clearly; and he thought that enough for the historian. But the enormous length of his *Norman Conquest* and *William Rufus*, with the abysmal notes and mighty Index, the *Sicily*, and the *Old English History* are so much overladen with trivial details, told with such portentous long-windedness, that only professional students, examinees, schoolmasters, and school-scholars, really master them. Narrative and description, he truly says, are no small part of historical writing. Amplification, interminable detail, and the pedagogue's desire to correct every conceivable blunder into which the reader might stray, grew upon him, until, in the greater histories, flesh and blood wearies of committing to memory, and even of reading, the mountains of information with which the learned historian is charged.

Hence Freeman retained to the last a great deal of the pedagogue in manner, though he was no professional teacher, even in his Oxford chair. What would have been the result if Gibbon had poured out on us all that he had

ever read or copied into his note-books ; or if Thucydides had put into eight volumes, instead of eight chapters, all that he had ever heard told him ? Not only does Freeman amplify his historical narrative till it becomes wearisome to all save the systematic student, but when he has to limit himself to a short narration he becomes almost commonplace and dull. A few hundred pages do not offer him space enough to deploy his hoplites. Having published his monumental history of the *Norman Conquest*, whereof the life and work of William himself fills two or three thousand pages, Freeman was induced to write the *Life* of the Conqueror in 200 pages for a popular series. No man living had anything like his consummate knowledge of the subject, or had more perfect command of all the materials. One would have thought that Freeman would have produced a fascinating biography almost *stans pede in uno*, without preparation or labour. But he did not seem to enjoy the task ; and the book he produced is the least interesting of all his works.¹

All that Freeman said or wrote about original authorities is truly excellent. It is doubtless the most important part of his teaching. And happily he illustrated his own admirable precepts by no less admirable practical examples of his own. He opens the fourth Oxford lecture with the excellent maxim : ‘The kernel of all sound teaching in historical matters is the doctrine that no historical study is of any value which does not take in a knowledge of original authorities.’ He carefully explains that ‘take

¹ He never hesitated to infuse into his writing antique words, in their original alphabetic form. Thus he wrote : ‘He who chooses a great writer of any age as his book does in some sort enroll himself in the *comitatus* of the writer of that book. He seeks him to lord ; he becomes his man ; he owes him the honourable duty of a faithful *έταῖρος* or *gesið* ; he does not owe him the cringing worship of the *δοῦλος* or the *βεόν*.’

in' does not mean 'limit itself to,' as some of the Freeman-nikins absurdly pretend. And he explains with singular clearness and judgment what constitutes an 'original authority' in the best sense—those who wrote from their own first-hand knowledge after careful weighing of all the available witnesses. Again, he fully allows the importance of many truly original authorities other than written narratives, such as official documents, treaties, statutes, coins, inscriptions, drawings, buildings, and many physical evidences and monuments.

The numerous works of Freeman present us with a series of almost perfect examples of how original authorities may be tested, combined, and used. It will be noticed that he says but little of the use of unpublished manuscripts. A vulgar impression existed at one time that Freeman composed his histories largely from such unedited manuscripts, and he tells us that he was once asked if any of the authorities he used had ever been printed. We now know that Freeman made no use in practice of unedited manuscripts; and he hardly ever resorted to them except for some special or occasional reference. Therein he showed his sound judgment and his thorough scholarship. The deciphering and copying of antique manuscripts is a special art, of immense difficulty and laboriousness, and for the early Middle Ages, at any rate, requires many years of special study, and is complicated with knotty problems of the age, the country, the language, the profession, and the personal equation of each particular writer. For a man like Professor Freeman, who was dealing with at least ten centuries in most of the countries of Europe, to have mastered the palaeography of all the original authorities was a physical impossibility. To have attempted it would have been a melancholy waste of his time and labour. And he very properly left this curious and rare learning to the experts,

palæographers, and editors of special epochs, to whom it naturally belongs.

A great amount of folly and cant is now current about ‘original authorities,’ as if these could be nothing but unedited manuscripts. A truly preposterous attention and an unreal value are now being given to unedited manuscripts, as if these were the sole resources of the historian, and as if he had always to decipher them with his own eye. No doubt ‘original authorities’ existed once in manuscript. But, happily, the larger part have long been edited and commented on by learned experts and scholars. When we get to the seventeenth century, the laborious historian may himself use manuscripts with freedom, as has been done with such admirable results by Macaulay, Carlyle, S. R. Gardiner, C. H. Firth, and others. But for the historian of early ages, dealing with an ample field of many centuries, to embarrass himself with palæography, except of necessity, is a wanton waste of force, and a great source of error. We know the welter of confusion into which Froude floundered when he went to Vienna and Samancas. Palæography is a very complicated and difficult art, and there is a special palæography for almost every century, each country, and almost every class and person. Freeman had other things to do than to acquire this art. He never pretended to have done so, and neither his precept nor his example gave any sort of countenance to the current palæographic superstitions.

Of course, it is of importance that all manuscript authorities of the smallest value should be accurately deciphered, copied, and edited. And the work that is being done by competent editors is excellent material for the future historians. But it is quite distinct from the work of the historian proper; although, where the age is not distant, and the subject of the history limited to a generation or

two, a wise historian like Mr. S. R. Gardiner will resort to the unedited material himself. But the fashion of the day is to attach a mystical value to a bit of written paper, however trivial be the writing on it, and however great a fool or liar the writer may have been. Raw girls, who could tell us nothing about the battle of Salamis or the French Convention, are encouraged to devote years of their lives to deciphering the washing accounts of a mediæval convent, the lists of the swine on a particular manor, or the tittle-tattle of some bed-chamber woman. It is conceivable that a competent historian might make use of washing-bills, farm-inventories, and chambermaids' scandal. But, until he asks for it, it is childish to call this rubbish 'original work,' simply because it can be made out from a mouldy bit of paper in an illegible hand of some centuries ago. What sort of 'history' of the reign of Victoria would be concocted if the learned historian rigidly confined himself to the 'original authorities' to be found in the private correspondence of members of Parliament, lords- and ladies-in-waiting, valets, and housemaids, as it passed through the Post Office, or was entered in their diaries? To this folly Freeman gave no kind of support, either by teaching or in practice. He did quite the contrary: though he is often cited as if, by relying on 'original authorities,' he attached a special and sacramental efficacy to any bit of old paper. The 'originality' of the document is not important. The real question concerns the knowledge, the good sense, the good faith of the man or woman who wrote on the paper.

There is great danger in our time that we fall into error by exaggerating the importance of what is known as 'new material,' and 'unpublished manuscripts.' The raw B.A.'s fresh from the schools' examinations, who concoct anonymous reviews, make a fuss about any 'new material,'

however trivial and mendacious, and treat with sovereign disdain anything composed from sources in print. But ‘new material’ and ‘unpublished manuscripts’ may be utterly misleading, and, *ex hypothesi*, are often secret, one-sided, prejudiced, and malicious. We see the lying stuff which is poured out daily in the continental press about all international affairs. All that torrent of venom and fable is unpublished manuscript till it gets into type. The private despatches, diaries, and memoranda in the chanceries, offices, and pigeon-holes of governments are often little more trustworthy and impartial. But if any of these hurried, partisan, and uncorrected effusions chance to be preserved for two or three centuries, it becomes ‘new material,’ to be treated by foolish people as if it were as sacred as Holy Writ.

What sort of a ‘history’ of our own generation would result if the historian relied upon his exclusive access to the private letters, diaries, or memoranda kept by the secretaries or the confidants of any amongst our leading politicians, or by the editor of a party journal. Some curious revelations there might be; but how little to be trusted as complete or conclusive! No doubt, if *every* letter, memorandum, conversation, and private discussion, were together before the historian, as fully and truthfully as they are believed to be known to the Recording Angel above, a great historian of vast industry, and high judicial power, would at last reach the truth. But this is what we never have, and never can have. A bit of the ‘original manuscripts’ chances to be preserved—the mere flotsam and jetsam of some huge wreck: perhaps, it may be, one is saved where a hundred are lost. It may be useful: the chances are that it is unimportant; but, taken alone as an *authority*, it may be utterly misleading. Even such historians as Macaulay and Gardiner, masters as they are of

the entire printed and manuscript materials of the brief period they study, seem at times disposed to trust over much to the private opinions, hearsay, and scandal, sent home to his employers, or sent off to amuse a friend, by some envoy, secretary, agent, or correspondent. The historian has access only, on each point, to at most two or three such diaries, despatches, and correspondences; and the temptation is great to rely on what he has got or has found. Where great men feel the temptation, little men fall before it. They share the prejudices of the writer, and they reproduce his libels and his blunders. When one sees how unpublished manuscripts have been used by the friends and enemies in turn of such struggles as the Reformation, the Civil Wars, the French Revolution, and the Irish Troubles — one is tempted to look with suspicion on ‘extracts’ and summaries of manuscript sources which we have not before us. It were safer that ‘new material’ should be left to the really great historians who devote whole lives and vast learning to a short period. It is a very dangerous tool in the hands of the lads and lasses who swagger about with it in public.

To this conceited fad Freeman gave no countenance at any time. He never doubted the central truth that history in the higher sense can only be composed with brains. Brains, knowledge of men, insight into things political and social, are the indispensable qualities for the historian. Industry, accuracy, impartiality, patience, wide culture, literary power — all these are good and needful; but they may all be rendered nugatory without the brain to understand politics and men of action. As the painter, asked how he mixed his glowing colours, replied that ‘he mixed them with brains,’ so the historian may reply that it is with brains that he truly records the past. The modern superstition that the past can be interpreted by laboriously

copying out and piecing together such scraps of written paper as time has chanced to spare did not satisfy Freeman. The historian, first and foremost, must be a politician, in the sense of having the instinct and experience which give him the understanding of political acts and persons.

Now, Freeman was a politician, as was his master Thomas Arnold, as was Macaulay, as was Gibbon, as were de Commines and Machiavelli. Freeman was a politician ; and for all his vast learning and patient collation of every written authority, he looked at men and events with a political eye, and with the grasp of a practical politician. It is unfortunately true that Freeman as a politician had many of the defects of that quality. He had prejudices—some really furious prejudices; he had race antipathies, religious odium, loathing of particular schools of thought, of nations, and writers. All this deeply discredited his impartiality as a general authority on universal history—a pretension indeed which he would have been the first to disclaim. It made several of his judgments unsound and some of them laughably unfair. His contemptuous ignoring of almost every deed, man, or movement in any member of the Latin races, later at least than the fifteenth century, his hatred of all Buonapartes (*sic*), his contempt for the eighteenth century and all its works in Europe, his loathing of Turks and all things Turkish—these things detract from his standing as a great historian, but happily they did not seriously affect his principal tasks. If they led to a somewhat extravagant enthusiasm for Saxon Englishmen and their influence on the world, they do not affect his estimate of Charles and Alfred, Harold and William, the two Emperors Frederick, and Edward the First. This was Freeman's true field ; and, when he left it, he was often far from an infallible guide. But the very

energy of his prejudices showed that he was no mere antiquary, copying out the notes of annalists, but was a man of strong political ideas seeking to judge men and to understand their acts.

There is another habit of mind, almost as essential to the historian as the political habit, and that is familiarity with the methods of proof which trained lawyers require as evidence. No historian has ever insisted so ably and at such length on the nature of trustworthy evidence as did Freeman. His teaching of his own method is excellent, and his own practice is hardly less valuable. But for his personal prejudices, Freeman might have made a very competent judge of a superior court. His patience and industry, his accuracy, his respect for written authority, and his passion for comparing and weighing evidence, were all eminently judicial. And his Essays as well as his Histories are models of the art of patiently collecting all the available evidence and then of weighing it in a balance, step by step, as to its comparative value. Freeman, of course, was not by any means the first historian to do this; nor has his system advanced on all that had been done long before him in Germany. But he has done more perhaps than any Englishman before him to explain the method in use, to illustrate his own injunctions, and to urge its immense importance. And hence he may fairly be regarded as the foremost English exponent of the testing of historical evidence, whereon he laboured so conscientiously both in theory and in practice.

There is a branch of the use of historical evidence which the zealous students of documents usually neglect, unless they have had something like a serious legal training. The lawyer is habitually slow to accept the statements of fact in documents laid before him until these statements have been tested in cross-examination, and

until the character of the witness has been laid bare in open court. He knows that in disputed cases of fact whole mountains of affidavits and paper evidence suggest to him little more than *prima facie* presumptions, until ample proof has been given of the credibility, good faith, and first-hand knowledge of the author of each document. Now, the facts in dispute in doubtful matters of history are enormously more complex and obscure than the evidence in any single cause at trial. The documentary evidence laid before the historian forms but casual scraps of information in comparison with the evidence in a cause prepared by experts having large compulsory powers. Yet the historian can use nothing but the documents that chance has left him; and all cross-examination and serious testing of the witnesses' veracity and knowledge are out of the question. The cases are rare indeed where a judge would feel certainty on mere documentary evidence such as that which is the sole resource of the historian. The judge knows how often the whole apparatus of justice fails to reach the facts of a simple matter. The historian—even the most patient and judicious of historians—insensibly comes to credit his documents, or some of them; and he rarely admits to himself that he has no adequate means of reaching the truth of tangled events, where the actors intended to mislead each other, the world, and posterity. The historian habitually shrinks from a verdict of Not Proven, though his bare documents—untested, ancient, and casual as they are—seldom enable him to go further in disputed facts.

Nearly all historians who attempt to give, with photographic minuteness, the exact details of complicated and obscure events, are wont to overrate the possibility of reaching the truth with the resources they have. It is the besetting weakness of the most industrious and careful of

historians. The masses of documents they have accumulated always seem to promise them certainty. It is a common delusion. Masses of documents will little avail where it is impossible to ask a single question, to hear a single witness speak, or to pass one inch outside the paper fragments which ruthless time may have spared. It is the Nemesis of the modern mania for original research and special detail. Now, Freeman, in his lectures and essays, often warns students against this very error. In his third Oxford address he very humorously showed how easy it was to be misled by a witness whom you could not cross-examine. In practice, he too often fell into the mistake of many learned historians, who imagine that unwearyed diligence, great accuracy of reading, and constant collation of documents, will enable them to give a detailed narrative of complicated events, centuries old, with all the minute fidelity of a *Times* report of a parliamentary debate. It fascinates us, until the endless bulk of detail wearies us; then we lose all sense of proportion, and are puzzled by the hordes of small facts that press on the memory; and at last we toss aside the interminable volumes, each of which carries us only a year or two further, and recounts one or two more campaigns and intrigues. And, after all, it is not *certainty* we have — for certainty, we are told, is recorded only in Heaven — it is not the absolute truth, it is merely a most ingenious mosaic, pieced together out of chance remnants of paper, themselves, alas! too often the record of ignorance, mendacity, and gossip!

Freeman was perfectly aware of all this, and in his own histories he is anxiously on his guard to test, not only (1) what is written, but (2) who wrote it, and (3) what did the writer know himself? But the enormous detail which Freeman felt it a point of conscience to impose on his readers led him into a kindred fault. He knew that he

himself knew everything that could be known of his subject. He took care to prove this to his reader ; but, furthermore, he determined that the reader himself should know everything that could be known. Now the unhappy reader, unless he was an examiner or an examinee, too often sank under the ordeal. This is the age of Photography, minutest Realism, of fissiparous Specialism, of the Infinitesimal. And our histories have to be constructed on the methods of a German savant hunting for microbes with a microscope. For purposes of investigation this is invaluable, and has given us memorable triumphs of research. But, to impart history to the public, a totally different process is required. There, what is wanted is grouping, condensation, synthetic composition—a life-like picture, not a photographic negative. And the historian who loads his massive volumes with all the smallest details which his instruments reveal commits the same fault as the painter who, in the early days of Pre-Raphaelitism, was said to have filled his canvas with some millions of strokes, when the eye of the beholder could barely grasp more than a few hundred at sight.

It must be confessed that the great *History of the Norman Conquest*, with its five volumes, 3700 pages, and Index volume, and *William Rufus*, with its two volumes and 1356 pages, make a work, which by its bulk is beyond the powers of the general public to master. It is the history of one people—a very great people—at a very important crisis; but at best it deals with one corner of Europe, and covers (after the sketch in the first volume) hardly more than half a century. At this rate, a hundred volumes would hardly contain the annals of our own country ; and five or six hundred volumes would hardly suffice for the history of the European nations since their incorporation with Rome. And even then, there would remain

a collection, hardly less ample, for the ages that preceded the Roman Empire, and for all the races of Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and America. The vision of a thousand volumes of 700 pages each rather daunts the reader, however anxious to study the past. ‘What is that to me?’ cries the learned historian. ‘This is my period, to which I have devoted my life.’ The world, however, is not as fond of ‘periods’ as a schoolteacher and a college tutor.

Ours is the age of examinations. To-day, the world naturally divides itself into examiners and examinees. And the system of ‘Periods’ and of minute Realism, is the very life-blood of examining. What our grandfathers used to call Polite Literature is dominated by the examination mania. And books are tested, precisely like an undergraduate’s paper-work, by the subtraction of ‘marks’; and for ‘marks’ nothing counts but blunders and omissions. The three-button Mandarins who control the higher education of our time are reducing the whole intellectual life of our age to a uniform scheme of Class, Pass, and Pluck, which requires little thought, and a great deal of blue pencil. If Gibbon were to be writing now, his work would be pronounced to be ‘meagre,’ ‘sketchy,’ and ‘viewy’; and as he could show no acquaintance with Hopf and Von Maurer, he would be marked down as a third-class historian. The examination *virus* is eating away the very brain fibre of our age—just as it has done in China. And these monumental triumphs of infinitesimal realism in narrow ‘periods’ are at once the product of examination and the *nidus* wherein its poison germinates.

To the student of English history, Freeman’s *History of the Norman Conquest* will always remain invaluable, a repertory of learned research, a monument of enlightened judgment, a manual of the evolution of the English race.

By precept and example the scholar learns from it how to weigh and compare authorities, and how to marshal his historical evidence. The first volume (published in 1867) deals with some five or six centuries in as many hundred pages. It is the introduction and summary: and therefore is in many ways the most successful. It is true that it consists rather of a series of essays than of continuous narrative. But the whole work is in some sense a series of essays; for the enormous bulk of the text and notes, the avalanche of facts and discussions which pour forth on the reader, seriously impair the sense of continuous narrative of the Norman Conquest, from which the attention is distracted by incidental lucubrations and interminable prolixity.

The second volume deals with the reign of the Confessor (less than twenty-four years) in 651 pages. The third volume, with 768 pages, deals only with the year 1066. In this volume the expedition of William fills about 150 pages, the great battle of Hastings occupying about fifty pages. The fourth volume, dealing with the reign of the Conqueror in England (1066-1087) occupies 724 pages. The fifth volume, with its Illustrations and Reflections on the Conquest, fills 901 pages. The Appendices alone of the five volumes, with a long array of learned and valuable essays on special points in the history, fill 700 pages, and are (for the student and examinee) not the least important part of the whole work. The Index, a monument of diligence and precision, occupies a sixth volume. And then follow two volumes on the short reign of William Rufus. This is a magnificent scale on which to narrate the history of our country down to the end of the eleventh century.

The student of history, the trained scholar, takes in every word of this mass of learning and wise judgment, and finds it a perfect encyclopaedia for the eleventh century in England. But the whole of it seldom reaches

others than trained scholars. It lacks the continuity, the directness, and narrative movement of a great history. The expedition of William, the invasion of Tosti and Harold Hardrada, the campaigns of Stamford Bridge and Hastings, are all told with the enthusiasm of a stout English spirit, and the learning of a Gibbon and a Macaulay. But, alas! they lack the literary magic of Gibbon or Macaulay. In the heat of battle we are pulled up to discuss the relative weight of authorities, whether Harold was fully entrenched, the arguments for and against a particular form of weapon, and many subtle points of topographical precision. It is not thus that the average reader of history cares to have the story of a great battle told him. He has no taste for learned Appendices about local topography — hardly intelligible away from the spot. And the result is that this great work of English history, which stands in the front rank to the serious scholar, has not a tenth part of the readers of far inferior works.

The life work of Professor Freeman is as yet the most memorable type of that which is the peculiar note of our age, the minute subdivision of history into special periods and the multiplication of petty detail. There is no evil, of course, in accurate knowledge of real things — no evil, but good. And the more sound Research we can have the better, provided we know how to use it with sense. The evil comes in when Research into myriads of special periods, topics, institutions, is mistaken for history, supersedes history, chokes off serious history. That is our danger. The dominant authority over human action vested in History in its higher sense, the Unity of History, the moral and social meaning of History, as the indispensable basis of Social Philosophy, this, in the words of Comte quoted by the Professor of History at Cambridge, is the intellectual feature of our age: it has been insisted on here

by Thomas Arnold, by Freeman, by Stubbs, by Bryce, by Seeley, by Lecky, by John Morley and Lord Acton. Of all these, Freeman has embodied this truth in the most ample language and with the most passionate conviction. The pity is, that his great works have had indirectly a somewhat contrary effect.

'The history of man is one in all ages,' says Freeman. We must look at history 'as one unbroken whole, no part of which can be safely looked at without reference to other parts.' The entire fabric of Social Science rests on that dominant doctrine. It cannot be stated more amply and peremptorily than it was stated by Freeman. Was this his own practice: is it the tendency of modern histories? In spite of some fine examples of synthetic history, as Gibbon, as Arnold, as Hallam, Milman, Grote, and Thirlwall, understood history, massing the centuries, the nations, the inspiring forces, into organic wholes, there can be no doubt that our analytic and microscopic Research immensely overshadows our coördinating activity. And the more ardent adepts of special Research are telling us now to leave all attempts at reconstructive history, at the synthetic biography of men and nations, until every muniment pile in Europe, Asia, or Africa, shall be definitely calendared, and every individual fact about the Past shall be exactly interpreted, edited, and given to the world.

It is a specious, but vain delusion. As well might men have said: 'Do not attempt to construct a theory of the solar system, until every speck of light discoverable by the most powerful telescope has been locally determined, and its conceivable variations compared at least over a thousand years!' Men might have said: 'Attempt no organic biology, until every germ, microbe, and fibre in every living being has been studied in fifty million monographs!' This is not science; it is pedantry. The recoverable facts

of the Past are not less numerous than the specks of light in the Milky Way, and not one out of any million is more important to human life. The real problem for man is to discover that one out of any million which is important — and this is what no industry can do without brains, without scientific and philosophic power. The tendency of modern palæographic Research is to multiply monographs, from which scientific coördination and philosophic synthesis shall be eliminated as if it were an irritant poison.

The grounds on which this mania for palæographic Research threatens mischief are numerous, and each of them is simply decisive. The discoverable facts (or rather statements) are literally infinite. They are growing hour by hour at a ratio far greater than any waste. To adjourn rational coördination of these infinite facts (or statements) till they are all registered is to adjourn it indefinitely. In the next place, quite a thousandth part of these facts are perfectly valueless, and can do nothing but burden the memory and obfuscate thought. The most powerful genius could do nothing with limitless materials; nor could Charles Darwin have worked out his thoughts had he been compelled to study every specimen collected in every museum or cabinet in Europe, and to read through every monograph turned out in the present century. In the next place, the blind and unintelligent study of facts, merely as facts, deadens the sense of proportion and relative value both for student and reader, and causes both to attach abnormal importance to the most paltry discovery, which acquires a fictitious value simply because it was difficult. And, finally, the so-called facts of history are not scientifically demonstrable at all, but at best are little but high probabilities. The physical sciences have a number of resources which are closed to the historian, who cannot experiment, isolate, or cultivate his microbes,

but can only trust the antique reports of ignorant, prejudiced, and careless scribes. We can be certain only of the broader facts of the historical record. Doubt increases, for the most part, in direct ratio with the minuteness of the special detail. We may rest assured that Julius Cæsar defeated Pompeius and was killed by Brutus and Cassius. Whole lives might be wasted in vain in seeking to prove what were his last words, and what passed between him and Cleopatra. History, in its worthy sense, is the main *organon* of Social Philosophy. To fulfil its high task, it must be organic and inspired with Synthetic Philosophy. To degrade History to the tabulating of interminable trivialities is to return to the literary pedantry of the copious but mindless tedium of the Byzantine annalists.

Yet, if Freeman were not a philosophic historian, not even a great historian at all, he was a consummate master of historical Research, and a noble inspirer of historical enthusiasm. For all his dogmatism, he was no pedant; in spite of prejudice, he had a passionate devotion to historical truth. His vast industry, his marvellous memory, his devotion to his high calling through a life of labour and singleness of purpose, will long secure him an honourable place amongst the teachers of our age. He was no mere specialist, no simple archæologist, no cold-blooded scholar. His studies ranged over broad epochs of ancient as well as modern history — over ethnology, geography, philology, palæontology, and architecture, as well as history and politics proper. To them all he brought the truly historic mind — which is the mind of profound sympathy with the great deeds and passionate hopes of Man in the Past.



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